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ABSTRACT

A brief description is given of the Bellack System, which is used to analyze the content and structure of discussion. The system identifies who speaks, when they speak, and what they say. Four types of pedagogical "moves" were identified by Bellack: (1) a structuring move--beginning a new topic; (2) a soliciting move--a question; (3) a response move--a reply to a question; and (4) a reaction--a comment following a response. In this study, a group of 26 sixth and seventh grade students and their teacher were observed during social studies discussion sessions for a period of 16 weeks. The discussions, which lasted from 20 to 40 minutes, were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed by an adaptation of the Bellack System. (JD)

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THE USE OF REACTING MOVES IN PROMOTING DISCOURSE

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The Use of Reacting Moves
in Promoting Discourse
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Effective discussions in which students and teachers share and develop ideas are a scarce commodity in classrooms despite their widespread approval as a learning mode. From elementary school to graduate schools of law and business, the group discussion has been touted as an optimal setting for the exploration of ideas (Dewey, 1902; McQuaid, 1983; Jacobson, 1984). Despite the consensus about their value, discussions are not flourishing in classrooms, and teachers are talking as much as ever in settings in which they intend to evoke student talk and participation (Goodlad, 1983; Sizer, 1984).

Method

The Bank Street School for Children, the laboratory school of the Bank Street College of Education in New York City prizes the articulation of student ideas and claims to promote learning through children's interactions with each other and with adults. The School seemed, therefore, to be a likely setting in which to observe and analyze the techniques of discussion-leading. I observed a group of 26 sixth and seventh grade students and their teacher during social studies discussion sessions for a period of sixteen weeks. Discussions which lasted from 20 to 40 minutes were audiotaped, transcribed and analyzed by an adaptation of the Bellack system (1966).

The Bellack system identifies who speaks, when they speak, and what they say. In this study Bellack's pedagogical "moves", as in a chess game, were used to note who spoke and when they spoke, but what was said or "categories of meaning" were derived from a study of the data. Bellack identified four types of moves: structuring, soliciting, responding, and reacting. A structuring move begins a new topic, a solicitation is a question, a response is a reply to a question, and a reaction is a comment which follows a response. Thus, a reacting move is an unsolicited comment and is of special interest because it denotes that a participant chose to speak after a response to a question was given.

Analysis of the content of the discussions resulted in classifying the moves into three categories of meaning: substantive, functional, and procedural. Substantive categories are: to explain, speculate, infer, opine, and inform. Functional categories concern the course or direction of the discussion and narrow or broaden the focus of discourse. They were developed to reflect this teacher's style of discussion-leading, and consist of the following: to clarify, amplify, highlight, recapitulate, and hold. The category, "hold", was developed to note that a common practice of the teacher was to restate or repeat a student's comment. Thus it seemed to be a comment which "held" the discussion rather than one which moved it in a specific direction. Another related behavior that the teacher manifested was to make remarks such as "okay", "uh-huh", "I see" which I have called minimal comments. Restate, repeat, and minimal are subcategories of the category "hold" and were frequently used by the teacher as reacting moves.

Categories of procedural meaning relate to classroom management and are: to direct (give directions, manage, and give turn-taking permission (call upon a volunteering student).

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Discussions were also analyzed according to Bellack's concept of a "teaching cycle". A cycle begins with a question or structuring move (i.e. "Today we will examine the effects of slavery on the economy") and lasts until the next question is asked. Using the teaching cycle it becomes possible to note the extent of student participation in response to a teacher's question.

Results

In the discussions the students talked more or made more moves than the teacher (MacDonald, 1982). This finding differs from other studies in which the Bellack system was used (Fey, 1970; Lundgren, 1972; Neujahr, 1976) and from recent reports on classrooms (Goodlad, 1983; Sizer, 1984). As might be expected, the teacher asked most of the questions in the discussions. However, both she and the students used the reacting move as their primary mode of expression. This phenomenon is of interest because of the characteristics of reacting moves: They are comments which are not conventionally necessary in discourse as, for example, answers to questions are. Thus they are unsolicited or "voluntary". Teacher reactions are more commonplace than student reactions because teachers frequently comment upon students' responses. It is less likely for students to comment on the remarks of a teacher or their peers. Yet this unusual behavior occurred frequently indicating that the students' participation was more self-initiated than teacher solicited.

That reacting moves were the favored move of both the teacher and the students indicates a similarity of participation in a setting where the teacher traditionally asks the questions and students answer them. Examination of the data using Bellack's convention of the teaching cycle revealed that 54 percent of the discourse (MacDonald, 1982) was composed of five or more moves. A common cycle in the discussions was teacher question→student response→teacher reaction→student reaction→ student reaction. Since the teacher was the principal initiator of cycles, she was responsible for permitting them to continue to the extent that they did. These long cycles provide information about her teaching style and reveal that she allowed a flow of talk before making her next initiating move.

What can we infer from the abundance of reacting moves? The worst scenario is that the participants blithely shared banalities. Such is not the case because we know the main substantive categories used were "explain" and "inform". Are reacting moves inherently better than questions? Clearly we need questions to initiate discourse. The categories "speculate" and "clarify" were developed to identify common patterns in this teacher's behavior. She frequently asked questions of speculation ("Why do you suppose he refused to pay the ransom?") and when students responded, she would probe for clarification ("Are you adding to what Tom said or are you agreeing with him?").

Discussion

It would seem that efforts to analyze student-teacher discourse should include a consideration of non-questioning teacher behavior. Susskind (1969) has described the negative effects of rapid-fire teacher questions, and Rowe (1974) has reported on the positive effects of teacher "wait-time". Gould (1974) found teachers' use of the expression "uh huh" (meaning yes) encouraged children's story telling efforts. Dillon's (1984) studies of teacher statements have provided alternatives to asking questions. The notion which the present study

suggests, that fewer direct questions generate greater student participation, has a parallel in therapeutic settings. A therapist stimulates patient participation not by direct questioning but rather by commenting non-judgmentally on the patient's remarks (MacKinnon & Michels, 1971; Lennard & Bernstein, 1960). The "holding environment" described by Winnicott (1965) in which the analyst provides the patient with an "atmosphere of safety" (Modell, 1976) resembles the holding remark in this study in which the teacher subtley encourages the flow of thought and talk by saying very little substantively, as in the categories restate, repeat, and minimal.

If as teachers we want to promote discourse and develop students' abilities to participate in discussions, we may need to examine our discussion-leading behavior. The combination of asking questions and creating a low-risk atmosphere may encourage students to express, develop, and share ideas. The use of reacting moves may work toward developing an atmosphere of safety and is a strategy to be considered in the promotion of discourse.

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